

Good evening, distinguished legislators, members of the Appropriations Committee and concerned citizens

My name is Susan Salters and I am an advocate at Independence Unlimited, one of five Independent Living Centers within Connecticut. I have been in this position for nearly 10 years. I reside in Manchester, CT and Jeff Currey is my State Representative in the 11 District. Every year the Independent Living Centers come before you with the numbers: how much Medicaid dollars our services save the State of CT by getting individuals out of long term care facilities or by preventing the premature institutionalization of people into those same facilities, the number of Connecticut residents benefitting from our core services, those we have helped to obtain housing, employment or entitlements. But our having to come back year after year seems to indicate to me that the numbers we give you just don't matter.

So I am here to offer you some other numbers. According to the Social Security Administration out of today's 20 year olds, 33% will become disabled before they reach retirement age. If this statistic applies to your son or daughter, who will they turn to if there are not any Independent Living Centers to provide one-on-one support and assistance? The 2013 Disability Status Report states that 173,600 Connecticut residents ages 21 to 64 already report having one or more disabilities. Who will all those individuals turn to when they need guidance on how to obtain much needed benefits, where to go when losing their homes or to find out what rights they have as people with disabilities?

As the years have shown, the numbers don't tell the whole story. Behind those numbers are people. People who are in desperate need or are trying hard to just to make it. After working in this field for so long, some of my stories include that of; a 40+ year old man with a significant disability as he goes off to work after more than a decade without employment or the jaunty step of a young girl who goes off to the mall with her own money in her pocket for the very first time to purchase clothing, no longer dependent on her family or the look of gratitude on the face of a mother who can finally see a stable future for her family. We need to be here with our phones on and our doors open to those who have no other place to go.

Recently a woman stepped inside our door with a frantic look and anxious, shaking hands. She didn't know how we could help her but was desperate for someone to reach out to her. A life-long employee she suddenly found herself with significant health issues which lead to a layoff from her employment of more than a decade and then, the end of unemployment benefits which would lead with certainty to the loss of her apartment. It wasn't long before the tears came into her eyes and the fear of what was going to happen to her covered her face.

An advocate took her into the office, instructed her to start with applying to the Department of Social Services for SNAP benefits, medical coverage and cash assistance and gave her the address and the application to get started on it. Then she was given a list of food pantries in the area and organizations that would help with food even for her pets. The staff member suggested, if her disability turned out to be permanent, she apply for Social Security Disability benefits and that she could return for guidance on how to go through the claims process.

Did this person care about the numbers of dollars we saved the State of Connecticut or how many other people had been helped? No, what was important to her was the individual attention she received and the hope she felt as she walked, head up, back out through the front door. Don't let our doors close or our offices go dark. Restore funding to the Independent Living Centers so we can be there for those who already deal with the effects of a disability daily and for those who will become disabled in the years to come. The number of people with disabilities in Connecticut is growing. With your help Independent Living Centers can be there for everyone that needs us now and in the decades to come.

At this time, I welcome any questions you may have.

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